Part III

THE DARK ART OF METAL

Chapter 7

The Art of Black Sabbath
Aristotle Joins the Band

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Black Sabbath, and heavy metal bands in general, suffer from a lot of misconceptions. Ignorant people will tell you that Black Sabbath (and all other metal bands) worship Satan, promote violence with their music, and even try to convince teenagers to commit suicide. But the strangest myth about the music of Black Sabbath, and about heavy metal in general, is that it has no value as art. Black Sabbath's early albums were reviled by music critics at the time of their release, even though they sold millions of copies and defined a whole new genre of music, a genre that is still going strong more than 40 years later. Even today, it is a popular opinion that heavy metal is, by its very nature, crap. I don't just mean that some people don't like heavy metal. I mean that a lot of people believe that metal is by its very nature inferior to other sorts of music, and will look down their nose at you for banging your head to Black Sabbath. But what makes music good or bad as art? It just so happens that Black Sabbath's music fulfills some very ancient and respected conceptions about what makes music and lyrics artistically valuable.

Of all the music critics who ever lived, the most influential was the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BCE). In fact, Aristotle has a pretty good claim to being the most influential person ever in a lot of fields. He wrote ground-breaking works on politics, ethics, logic, metaphysics, biology, and numerous other subjects. It would be difficult to overstate Aristotle's contribution to thought in the Western world. In his *Poetics*, he presents his view of the requirements for

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artistically important comic and tragic verse, including songs. Tragically, we lost Aristotle's work on comedy centuries ago but, funnily enough, his work on tragedy survives. Now, what has this got to do with Black Sabbath?

Far from providing us with grounds to dismiss Black Sabbath's music, Aristotle's account of poetry offers us a framework for the appreciation of Black Sabbath's music as valuable art. Aristotle was born too soon to be a metalhead (by about two and a half thousand years), but given the chance, he just might have found a great deal to like in Black Sabbath. Let's take a closer look at what Aristotle might say about Black Sabbath. To make that easier, let's lift him out of ancient Athens and drop him into Birmingham, England, in 1970, with a burning desire to play in a rock and roll band. He digs the heavier sound being pioneered by bands like Led Zeppelin and Deep Purple, but he's hungry for something with even more edge to it. So he places an ad in a local music shop window—"Aristotle plays full throttle. Needs gig" —and waits for a response.

Bringing Aristotle up to Date

Getting Aristotle to the point where he is ready to audition for Black Sabbath is going to require more than just teaching him English and handing him a guitar. There is a wide gulf in social attitudes between ancient Greek culture and Birmingham youth culture in the late 1960s. Aristotle was a well-bred Greek gentleman. His mother, Phaestis, was of aristocratic descent, and his father, Nicomachus, was personal physician to Amyntas III, king of Macedon. In Greek society, a well-bred gentleman may write poems and songs, but he does *not* play a musical instrument. Aristotle had tremendous respect for music, but in line with the popular attitudes of his day, he despised musicians. In his *Politics*, he writes "we ourselves treat the professors of these arts as mean people, and say that no one would practice them but a drunkard or a buffoon."[1] Aristotle is going to have to lose the attitude if he's going to audition for Black Sabbath, so I'm going to say that he's learned some perspective from living in the twentieth century and has dropped his prejudices against being in a band. Like Lars Ulrich of Metallica and so many other rock musicians, he's going

to sweep his middle-class origins far under the rug. When Black Sabbath answer his ad, Aristotle will claim that he was born in Manchester.

The other prejudice that Aristotle will have to lose is his prejudice against artistic innovation. In 1970, Black Sabbath is a wildly experimental group, taking popular music in entirely new directions. Aristotle, on the other hand, is from ancient Greece, where popular entertainment evolves at a slower pace. Some of his specific advice on the topic of music and lyrics seems ridiculously restrictive to us today. When Aristotle describes the categories into which poems and songs have to fit, or discusses the instruments that a musician might use, or even the sort of story-lines that verse should convey, he only has his own cultural tradition to draw on, and his conception of what art can do is necessarily narrow and limited. He doesn't consider the possibility of guitar music, because there *are* no guitars, or the possibility of using a 4/4 beat because nobody had thought of doing that yet.

The limitations on Aristotle's perspective have given him a reputation for being hopelessly artistically conservative—the ultimate square. I don't think that this reputation is fair, though, and I don't think that he is far from being able to accept musical and lyrical innovation. There are two reasons for this.

Firstly, when Aristotle discusses the nature of good music and verse in the *Poetics*, his primary purpose is to describe the state of the art, rather than to tell us the form that good music and verse *must* take. In other words, he is mainly describing good music and verse *as it is* in the fourth century BCE, rather than trying to impose limits on the form. An analogy might be helpful here. Imagine that you are writing a book explaining how to play the electric guitar well. One of the first things you might explain is how to tune a guitar properly. After all, knowing the standard rules for tuning your guitar is important. However, a rule that you must tune your guitar in the standard way can become a limitation on creativity. Black Sabbath *detuned* their guitars in the early 1970s. This detuning produced a distinctive sound that gave Black Sabbath's music a darker quality, and has become a traditional technique in heavy metal music. A rule regarding how guitars must be tuned could prevent this technique. However, when the author of a book on how to play guitars tells you how the strings should be tuned, the author

doesn't necessarily mean to say that there can't *possibly* be another legitimate way to tune them. When the author tells you how to play a guitar well, they are just telling you how good guitar playing is currently done, rather than insisting that it is the only possible way to make good guitar music. Similarly, when Aristotle explained in detail how music should be played or how lyrics should be written, his main object was to explain how good art was being produced at the time, rather than to present the only possible ways to produce good music and lyrics.

Secondly, Aristotle understands that a legitimate function of music is simply to provide enjoyment. The mere fact that people like to listen to the music of Black Sabbath makes the music matter as art. He states in *Politics* that music is legitimate even if it does nothing more than bring pleasure and a respite from the stresses and strains of work and life,

> For the end is not desirable for the sake of any future good, nor do the pleasures which we have described exist for the sake of any future good but of the past, that is to say, they are the alleviation of past toils and pains. And we may infer this to be the reason why men seek happiness from these pleasures.[2]

Aristotle even specifically recognizes, in a snotty, condescending way, that music that specifically appeals to the working classes is important simply because the working classes enjoy it. This is so even if it lacks harmony to a more refined ear. He writes:

> [for] the vulgar crowd composed of artisans, laborers, and the like—there ought to be contests and exhibitions instituted for . . . [their] relaxation . . . And the music will correspond to their minds; for as their minds are perverted from the natural state, so there are perverted modes and highly strung and unnaturally colored melodies. A man receives pleasure from what is natural to him, and therefore professional musicians may be allowed to practice this lower sort of music before an audience of the lower type.[3]

So let's allow that Aristotle in 1970 has lost his ancient prejudice against musical innovation. He understands now that radical change can be exactly the sort of shot in the arm that art needs to progress.

Aristotle Joins Black Sabbath

Now Aristotle is almost ready to audition for Black Sabbath. He just needs to get the look right. Diogenes Laertius, who wrote a biography of Aristotle, describes him as an unattractive man with beady eyes and spindly little legs. That's alright; being an ugly bastard never held anyone back in heavy metal. (In what other genre of popular music could Lemmy from Motörhead have a hit, even with a song as good as "Ace of Spades"?) More problematic for Aristotle is that the fashion for men in his day was to have short hair and a full beard. That's not going to look right. Let's have Aristotle grow his hair long like a hippy and shave his beard down to a bushy mustache so that he better fits in with Black Sabbath circa 1970.

What about the gear? Diogenes Laertius tells us that Aristotle "used to indulge in very conspicuous dress, and rings, and used to dress his hair carefully."[4] Perhaps, left to his own devices, Aristotle might opt for a glam-metal look like Mötley Crüe or Poison (or, God help us, KISS). Fortunately, Black Sabbath will stand for none of that. Aristotle will have to settle for a black shirt with a garish silver cross, and occasionally brushing his long hair. Besides, for all his love of conspicuous dress, Aristotle regards it as important that spectacle doesn't detract attention from lyrics and music. Aristotle recognized that it is good to put on a show for the audience, but he believed that producing a spectacle is a less "artistic" achievement than producing music and lyrics—"The spectacle, though an attraction, is the least artistic of all the parts, and has least to do with the art of poetry."[5] When Aristotle finally gets to see theatrical bands like Alice Cooper and Gwar, he will slap his forehead and groan "metal used to be about the *music!*"

What role in Black Sabbath will Aristotle audition for? He probably won't want to play the drums, so Bill Ward is safe there. In Aristotle's culture, drumming was an art mainly pursued by women, so I'm going to guess that being the drummer seems rather effeminate to him. However, he liked to give public lectures, so maybe he would like to be front man in place of Ozzy Osbourne. The band give him a tryout. Unfortunately, Diogenes Laertius tells us that Aristotle spoke with a lisp, so as the philosopher launches into the opening lines of "Black Sabbath," his raw volume and impassioned delivery can't make up for the fact that he's singing "What ith thith that thtandth

before me? Figure in black which pointh at me!" Ozzy will remain the lead singer. Aristotle tries out for lead guitar next, but he can't compete with the skill of Tony Iommi. Aristotle suggests that Black Sabbath could employ *two* rhythm guitarists, as Judas Priest do, but Iommi won't budge—Geezer Butler used to a be a rhythm guitarist too, but had to move to bass guitar when he joined. Just to add insult to injury, then, let's have Aristotle join Geezer on the bass.

At least Geezer will still get to write almost all of the lyrics. Or will he? Aristotle wants to have a crack at that too. Aristotle wrote two books of poems and more poetry besides, including a hymn with the verse "For thee what son of Greece would not / Deem it an enviable lot, / To live the life, to die the death / That fears no weary hour, shrinks from no fiery breath?"[6], which are pretty metal lyrics for a hymn. I can imagine Ozzy belting that out on stage. Unfortunately, Aristotle's poems have been lost since ancient times, so let's say that one of Geezer's cigarettes accidentally sets fire to Aristotle's notebook, ending his direct lyrical contribution to Black Sabbath.

What Aristotle does have to offer the band, at the very least, is a capacity to appreciate their work. Stripped from the limitations of specific ancient Greek artistic traditions, Aristotle's conception of what makes for good or bad art offers us a philosophy of art that can recognize and value the importance of what Black Sabbath is doing. As mentioned, Aristotle believes that the pleasure people get from music is justification enough for that music's existence. However, Aristotle has more reason to like Black Sabbath's music than just that he can bang his head to it. In particular, Aristotle in the seventies loves the darkness of Black Sabbath's music, and he loves the band's willingness to reflect on the human condition, even in the form of musical fantasies and nightmares.

The Need for Dark Art

Surely the most controversial aspect of Black Sabbath's music is the sheer darkness it often achieves. With a tone inspired by horror movies, Black Sabbath in the early 1970s often express a sense of negativity and hopelessness that was unprecedented in popular music. Contrary to hysterical folklore, the band never sided with evil and destruction. One of the central messages of their work is that love is

better than hate—as exemplified in "Wicked World," "Into the Void," and "A National Acrobat." Another central message found in their albums is that God and the forces of good will win in the end—as exemplified, for instance, in "War Pigs," "After Forever," and "Lord of this World."

Still, the mood evoked by Black Sabbath is often bleak and desperate, as the lyrics explore themes of misery and doom. "Happiness I cannot feel / And love to me is so unreal" wails Ozzy in "Paranoid," turning the hippy lyrical aesthetic of the late 1960s on its head. In "Wheels of Confusion" he complains: "So I found that life is just a game / But you know there's never been a winner / Try your hardest, just to be a loser / The world will still be turning when you're gone." On occasion, things turn dark for the entire world in a Black Sabbath song. Sometimes we face apocalyptic warfare, as in "War Pigs," "Electric Funeral," and "Hole in the Sky." If we are really unlucky, we might even face a rampaging devil as in "Black Sabbath," or worse, an angry God, as in, again, "War Pigs."

Many people find songs with such themes repellant. Why sing about terrible things when you could sing about wonderful things? Why sing about unhappiness and fear when you could sing about positive emotions like joy and security? This is, of course, exactly the sort of sentiment expressed by people who object to horror movies, seeing in them an unhealthy glorification of the negative where there could be an inspiring story of something positive.

Aristotle, however, was a horror junkie, who saw the theater of horror as one of the pinnacles of cultural achievement. Now, when I say that Aristotle was a "horror" junkie, I don't mean that he would recognize the modern film genre that directly influenced Black Sabbath. But he did like plays to be about horrible things happening to people. It was particularly important to him that the characters were sympathetic, that they suffered horribly, and that there was always an unhappy ending. Like other ancient Greeks, he recognized only two types of play: comedies and tragedies. In the surviving book of his *Poetics*, Aristotle discusses good tragedy in detail, and stresses that it is a more important artistic form than both comedy and epic poetry. In case you think I'm cheating by calling Aristotle a "horror junkie," keep in mind that Greek tragedies were hardcore. In Sophocles' play *Oedipus the King*, everyone in the city of Thebes is dying from a plague sent by the gods because of an unsolved murder

(the gods didn't *tell* the Thebans that's why they sent a plague; the Thebans were left to work it out). The king of Thebes, Oedipus, is a fine upstanding ruler who always strives to do what is right. He sets out to solve the case, only to learn that he once accidentally killed his own father, and that his wife is really his mother, with whom he has produced several children. Upon learning that her husband is her son, Oedipus' mother commits suicide. Taking all of this about as well as can be expected, King Oedipus rips out his own eyeballs and goes off to live as a wandering homeless lunatic in constant torment. The end.

You would never have been allowed to put a story that horrific in a horror movie in the 1970s, nor will you ever find a tale quite that blackly demented in a Black Sabbath song (in death metal, black metal, or grindcore maybe, but not Sabbath). Aristotle, however, thought that *Oedipus the King* was a really excellent play, about as good a play as he had ever seen. Far from finding the horror and despair repellant or over the top, he believed that the very awfulness of the events depicted was an essential part of what made the play great art.

Aristotle believed that art dealing with negative emotions could purify the soul in accordance with a process that he called *katharsis* (now the word *catharsis* in modern English). Catharsis is the purging of negative emotions, especially fear and pity, by feeling them on behalf of the human subjects of an artistic performance. By feeling fear and pity on behalf of a poor bastard like Oedipus, we get the negative emotions out of our system. In Greek, *katharsis* literally refers to any kind of purging, including the inducement of vomiting. Through exposure to dark art, our soul vomits up the bad emotions, leaving us cleansed.

Aristotle would recognize the cathartic nature of Black Sabbath's music. In their bleakest songs, we are invited to sympathize with people who are suffering. In "Black Sabbath," Ozzy presents himself as every bit as doomed out of nowhere as King Oedipus. A black apparition "with eyes of fire" has suddenly appeared to tell him that, against his will, he is Satan's chosen one ("Oh no!" he says—as you would). Then Satan shows up, everybody is running and screaming, and everything is on fire. It's a good song. Aristotle can perfectly well understand that the very darkness of "Black Sabbath" is an integral element of what makes the song good because it is precisely the horror of the situation that engages our emotions.

Similarly, consider what a noble but abused hero we find in "Iron Man." If we take the lyrics literally, Iron Man has personally saved all of humanity (by traveling in time through a big magnetic field that turned his body to steel, which is bad science even for a metal song). Now nobody wants Iron Man or cares about him. He stands perfectly motionless, but nobody ever tries to help him, though they don't know if he is paralyzed, or even if he is alive or dead. Even if we take the song less literally, perhaps as a metaphor for the treatment of war veterans, the point is that Iron Man has been betrayed and maltreated. Like King Oedipus, he is a highly sympathetic character and an exceptionally unlucky bastard. Like King Oedipus, he engages our sympathies, and through sympathizing with an imaginary person in such a terrible position, we experience catharsis. In apparent acknowledgment of the powers of catharsis, Ozzy concludes "Paranoid" by expressing his hope that hearing about how unhappy he is will make the listener feel better—"And so as you hear these words / Telling you now of my state / I tell you to enjoy life / I wish I could but it's too late."

The Need to Shake up Your Mind

Besides pleasure and catharsis, Aristotle recognized one final function of good art. Good art makes you think. Aristotle claimed that the difference between history and poetry is that "the one describes the thing that has been, and the other a kind of thing that might be. Hence poetry is something more philosophical and of graver import than history."[7] In other words, poetry is more important than history because poetry allows us to imagine alternatives to the way that things have been. It is only by understanding the alternative forms that life can take that we can truly understand our own condition. Black Sabbath explores alternative forms of life not just by channeling extreme personal feelings, but by painting a variety of possible futures for humanity. In "War Pigs," the future holds an apocalyptic war in which evil generals conspire to spread death and hatred, plotting destruction just for fun. In "Electric Funeral," the future holds a quicker, atomic alternative. Instead of burning in the fields as in "War Pigs," we burn at home in a "globe of obscene fire." We brought it on ourselves too, with our own lack of resistance—"Robot minds of

robot slaves / Lead them to atomic graves." Presenting yet a third alternative, in "Children of the Grave," the narrator urges the "children of the world" to rise up in the name of love and peace before humanity is destroyed and the "children of today" become "children of the grave." The listener is challenged to think about how good or bad the future may be, and about their own role in our march toward it.

It goes without saying that the songs of Black Sabbath do not present detailed and tightly argued political advice. Aristotle would probably like the band to move further in that direction. He stresses in his book *Rhetoric* that people are best persuaded by well-reasoned arguments. But that isn't what the music of Black Sabbath is for. What we get from Black Sabbath is not a plan for political action, but a dream or nightmare to inspire us to think about our world and our place in it. Aristotle makes it clear in both his *Politics* and his *Nicomachean Ethics* that he is a firm believer in the need for political involvement, on the grounds that the health of our society depends on our being politically active. He states in *Politics* that "If liberty and equality, as is thought by some, are chiefly to be found in democracy, they will be best attained when all persons alike share in the government to the utmost."[8] Now, since Aristotle was writing this in the fourth century BCE, he didn't mean that people like women, or slaves, or non-Greeks should be permitted to vote. All the same, he had cottoned on to the essential idea that healthy government requires everyone to stand up and participate. Given this, Aristotle is able to understand the importance of what Black Sabbath is doing in conjuring fantasies of annihilation and revolution.

Sometimes, of course, Black Sabbath's lyrics take the listener well beyond the realm of probability. Songs like "The Wizard" and "Symptom of the Universe" are pure magical fantasy, while the way that Satan turns up in "Black Sabbath" and God turns up in "War Pigs" owes more to drama than realism. Aristotle is perfectly alright with stretching probability, though. He explicitly tells us that art can legitimately relate wildly improbable events if doing so makes the story better. He says of the poet that "Any impossibilities there may be in his descriptions of things are faults. But from another point of view they are justifiable, if they serve the end of poetry itself—if . . . [that is] they make the effect of either that very portion of the work or some other portion more astounding."[9]

Sweet Leaf?

One last important philosophical question remains to be addressed. Would Aristotle, as a member of Black Sabbath, join in the drinking and drug-taking? You are probably well aware that booze and drugs are an integral part of the story of early Black Sabbath, eventually leading to Ozzy Osbourne's being fired in 1979 for being out of control. When bottles are being opened or joints being passed around, what does Aristotle do? And is he interested in something harder?

Aristotle makes it clear in his *Nicomachean Ethics* that pleasure is an important part of life and that a little bit of self-indulgence is a good thing. He held that drinking, like other physical pleasures, should be pursued in moderation. Over-indulging in alcohol is a bad thing, but Aristotle also thought that it was a character flaw not to be willing to appreciate harmless pleasures like having a drink—"the man who shuns every pleasure, as boors do, becomes in a way insensible."[10] So yes, Aristotle will have a beer, but he won't drink himself into alcoholism. And the sweet leaf? Aristotle will have a puff on that too, thanks. Marijuana was unknown in ancient Greece, but the same principle that recommends drinking in moderation recommends moderate use of weed too. Marijuana is unlike alcohol in that it is illegal, but Aristotle did not believe that all laws are good laws, stating in his *Politics* that "Even when laws have been written down, they ought not always to remain unaltered."[11] Nor did Aristotle believe that a bad law must necessarily be obeyed—when he was wrongfully accused of impiety in Athens, he fled the city rather than obey the law and accept his punishment.

What about harder drugs? As the money starts to roll in, does he turn to cocaine, the bane of early Black Sabbath and the drug that, more than any other, dissolved the original line-up of the band? No, he'll skip the blow, thanks. The same principles of moderation that forbid excessive drinking in *Nicomachean Ethics* forbid the use of cocaine altogether. There is no safe way to dabble moderately in snorting coke. Given how powerful and physically addictive the drug is, any use of it must be considered excessive.

The position on drugs being described is relatively close to that advocated on early Black Sabbath albums, even if the band members themselves didn't always take their own advice. The song "Sweet

Leaf" is a love song to marijuana. The attitude toward it is clear—the sweet leaf is pleasurable, so smoking it is a good thing. Yet Black Sabbath is more eager to warn us about the dangers that lie in drugs than they are to tell us about the pleasures. "Hand of Doom" is an angry harangue against a heroin addict dying from an overdose. "Fairies Wear Boots" could at first be mistaken for psychedelic whimsy, of a sort that other bands had long been doing. But when Pink Floyd or David Bowie saw gnomes, the explanation was magical. When Black Sabbath sees gnomes, the explanation turns out to be much more realistic; there is a drug problem involved. "Snowblind" is a song about the love of cocaine, just as "Sweet Leaf" is a song about the love of marijuana, but here the tone is not joy but impending doom. Ozzy loves the snow, but it is freezing him to death—"Something blowing in my head / Winds of ice that soon will spread / Down to freeze my very soul / Makes me happy, makes me cold."

Ozzy Osbourne did indeed have a serious problem with booze and drugs, including cocaine. He's clean now (good on you Ozzy!), but back in the 1970s things went from bad to worse until he finally split from Black Sabbath in 1979. No doubt Aristotle pleaded with him to show some restraint and moderation, but you cannot reason with somebody who is high. So Ozzy leaves Sabbath and goes on to record *Blizzard of Ozz* (1980) and *Diary of a Madman* (1981). Black Sabbath replace Ozzy on vocals with Ronnie James Dio and go on to record *Heaven and Hell* (1980) and *Mob Rules* (1981). But they do it without Aristotle. The band just doesn't seem the same without Ozzy, and Aristotle follows him out the door. He goes on to write books about ethics, politics, and logic, and to front Iron Maiden, Megadeth, and Äristötlë.

Asked in a 1983 *Rolling Stone* interview to sum up the biggest lesson he learned during his time in Black Sabbath, Aristotle quoted his own *Nicomachean Ethics* ". . . men make themselves responsible for being unjust or self-indulgent, in the one case by cheating and in the other by spending their time in drinking bouts and the like; for it is activities exercised on particular objects that make the corresponding character."[12] What he means by that is

> Black Sabbath was a great band—*is* a great band [*Raises horns*]. We invented heavy metal and we put out a string of classic albums. But if there is one thing I learned in my time with Black Sabbath, it's this: don't risk getting into any habits that you might not easily be able to get yourself out of again.

Notes

1. Aristotle, *Politics, The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. J. Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), Book VIII, 2125.
2. Ibid., Book VIII, 2125.
3. Ibid., Book VIII, 2129.
4. Diogenes Laertius, *The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R.D. Hicks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925), Book XI, 181.
5. Aristotle, Poetics, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. J. Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 2321.
6. Diogenes Laertius, *The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, Book XI, 183.
7. Aristotle, *Poetics*, 2323.
8. Aristotle, *Politics*, Book IV, 2050.
9. Aristotle, *Poetics*, 2337.
10. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics, The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. J. Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), Book II, 1744.
11. Aristotle, *Politics*, Book II, 2014.
12. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III, 1758–1759.